TAFT TALK

No. 78 *Newsletter of the Taft Family Association* **Jun 2020**

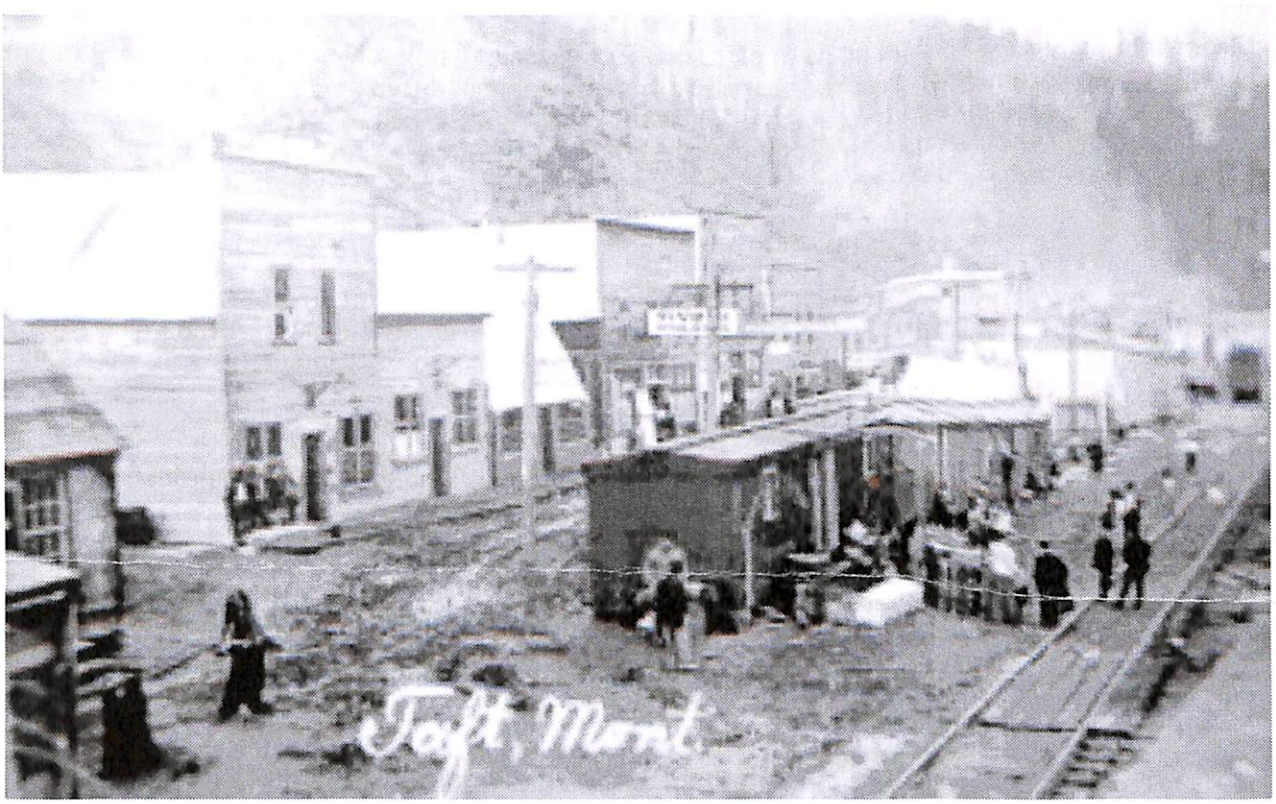


Photo from Spokanehistorical.org

Taft, MT: The Town that doesn't exist… anymore… a classic ghost town

Like so many boomtowns, Taft, MT was created in a frenzy more than 110 years ago and then disappeared just as quickly, the railroad project having been completed, but more specifically because of the disastrous "Big Burn" of 20/21 Aug1910, caused by Palouser winds.

The Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Railroad was in the competition to build transcontinental rail lines to the Pacific Coast. The route took the rail through the middle of the Bitterroot Mountains, dividing Idaho and Montana. In 1907 they recruited thousands of workers, many immigrants, who spent "two arduous years boring through hard rock to create a landmark 1.7 mile tunnel" (now the St. Paul Pass, or Taft, Tunnel), as part of the construction. During the process it is estimated that 72 people died from "construction accidents, deadly diseases, gunfights and other violence." They were buried in a makeshift cemetery outside town. The location of this "Boot Hill" cemetery was lost in the fire as well as the "wooden saloons, brothels, construction buildings and sawmill."

The town was named for William Howard Taft, who was Secretary of War when he visited the site in 1907 and was subsequently "honored" for his visit by having the erstwhile town named for him.

See Taft, MT (pp 3,4, 6))

From the Board of the Taft Family Association

The Board of TFA is continuing to work on the issues surrounding dissolution of our Association. Sadly, as you know this is the last year of the Taft Tree Talk. We have also realized that the Taft stone monument in Mendon, MA lies on a half acre of land that the Association actually owns. We are in contact with various local entities to see who would be the best beneficiary of this land and how it can be maintained in the future. We will keep you posted on those developments.

Meanwhile we are working on plans to place our Taft genealogy online. We have a great deal of information, but it has been accumulated over the years by different people in different configurations, so the effort will be to systemize what goes in the database. This will probably be added in batches, beginning with Robert and Sarah and their children, as information gets confirmed. If anyone would like to be part of that endeavor, let me know (patmarkallen@gmail.com).

Gene Seelye keeps your editor honest (or at least he tries!!!)

Sorry about the errors in "Small World Once Again" (TTT 77 p 2). Archibald Taft should be Arch Taft. He was never Archibald. Also the fingers goofed and "Eugene Arch Seeley" should be "Eugene Arch Seelye".

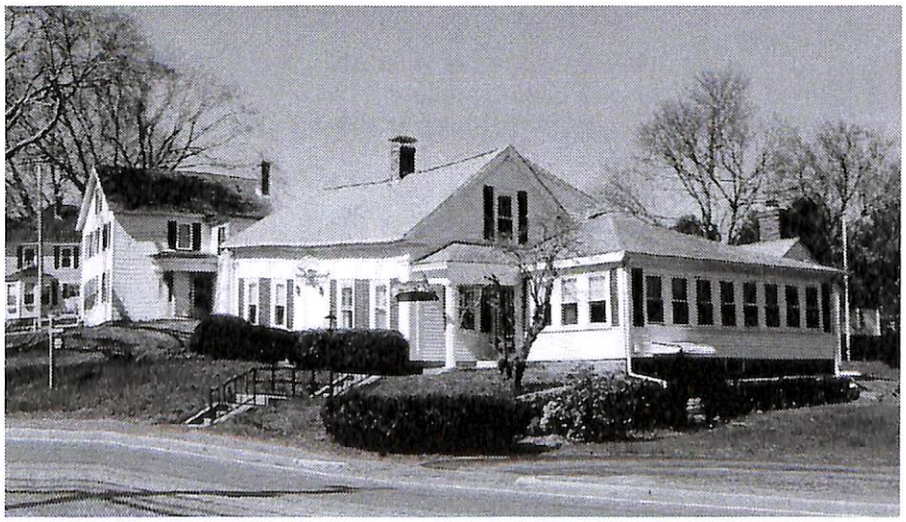
Thank you, Gene, for correcting me and clarifying once and for all Arch vs Archibald.

And thank you again, Gene, for sending the New York Times clipping that led to our feature article.

Mendon Historical Society has a new home and it's one we know well!

TFA member David Lowell informed us that the Mendon Historical Society and Museum has moved from 3 Main St., Mendon, MA to 15 Hastings St., Mendon, MA. Their hours are Tuesday from 11:00 am to 3:00 pm and Sunday noon to 4:00 pm.

If their building looks familiar, that is because it was the home of our long-time Secretary-Treasurer, Berneta (Lowell) DeVries. The executive board of the TFA held many of its meetings on that lovely porch to the right. Across the street was the Lowell Dairy which was her father's establishment. Berneta willed her home to the Mendon Historical Society. The Soceity has done an amazing job of re-purposing it to fit their needs.



After Robert Taft moved from Braintree, Mendon and Uxbridge became the home base of the first several generations of the Taft family. The family thrived and expanded tremendously (just look at the children most families had). As we know, the Taft Memorial Stone in Mendon sits on his original homestead in town. Now Berneta's home will be an important addition to the town's history.

See p 5 for more on the Historical Society's exhibits.

Taft, MT

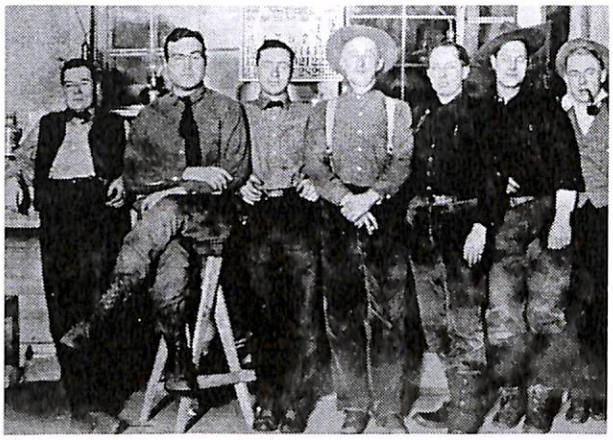
On his visit, William Howard Taft was reputed to have called Taft "a sewer of sin" and "a sore on the otherwise beautiful national forest." He "berated the town as a blight on the American landscape which must clean up its act, to a cheering drunken crowd. The town was then enthusiastically named in his honor."

"In its earliest years, the town consisted mostly of men working for the railroad, mining, or forest industries. It was notorious for drinking, gambling… and a reputed 'five prostitutes for every man'." One reporter described it as the 'wickedest city in America.'"

"Taft sprang up immediately, its population swelling to nearly 3,000 souls by the 1910 census. Like most railroad construction whistle-stops, she was no beauty queen… As towns go, Taft was strictly utilitarian serving as the operations base for the gigantic tunnel, which required a skilled workforce of teamsters, loggers, miners, cooks, drillers and laborers working round the clock… At its peak in 1908, when the tunnel finally opened amid great fanfare, there were 1,800 employees working out of Taft. Italian stone masons, Swedish lumbermen, mule skinners, freighters and hundreds of other skilled and unskilled laborers followed the tracks west to the formidable slopes of the Continental Divide, there to construct a tunnel that detractors claimed to be 'unimaginably expensive and a colossal boondoggle.' It became the nation's most expensive railroading feat in history.

"As far as can be determined, there was never a church in the town … or a library, school, or Masonic Temple, or an opera house or fire department. Taft featured one grocery store, two cafes and a drug store. In contrast, there were 500 prostitutes and 30 saloons by one Missoulian journalist's count, and 'everything on a high level of impropriety.'

"Taft displayed no clear existence of law enforcement, either… Time and again, deputies would be dispatched there only to find no witnesses, no evidence and no suspects in some high-level crimes including assault, homicide, robbery and rape… Lawlessness, then, was the order of the day in Taft. One spring, as the snow receded, eight frozen bodies were found in and around the town sporting stab wounds and bullet holes. The year 1907 saw 18 documented—but unsolved—homicides. Nobody talked. Labor clashes were not uncommon…

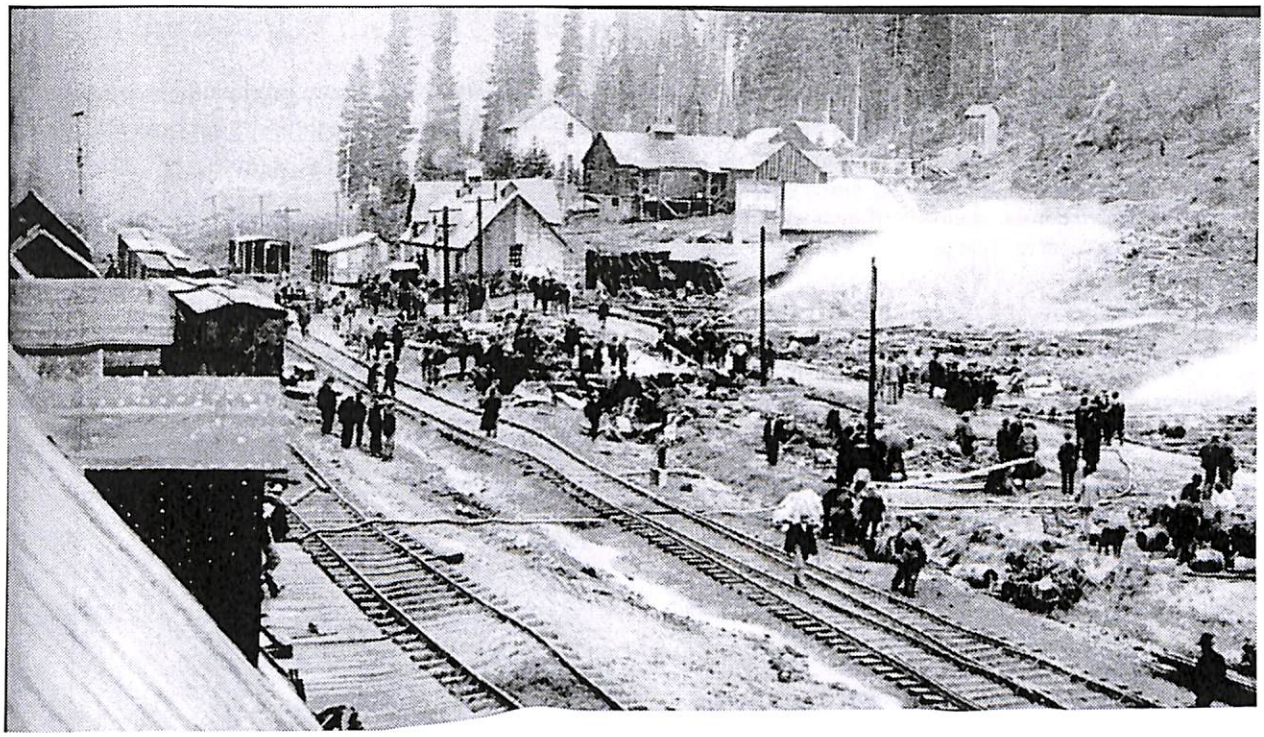


Saloon swells and hardened criminals
Sources: photos from BigSky and spokanehistoricalsociety

"Missoula County attorneys and deputies could only shrug. Finding a solid witness in Taft was like finding a proper woman. Forest Service rangers had no better luck curbing prostitution as cribs crept into the Lolo National Forest surrounding the town, one in a crude tree house. Taft claimed to have one prostitute for every three men and a murder rate higher than New York City… The caches of whiskey and rum, the slot machines, the hundreds of hookers, the killers and felons who mocked the rangers … that's what Taft represented to a forest ranger. One young ranger assigned to the Taft District telegraphed his supervisor: 'Two undesirable prostitutes established on government land,' he wired. 'What should I do?' 'Get two desirable ones,' was the reply.

"As round-the-clock shift workers disgorged from the tunnel bound for the bars, another shift replaced them, often swapping beds in boarding houses for brief rest before a locomotive whistle announced a new shift, another dollar to be earned and then spent in the prostitute cribs and gambling dens. Taft was awash with vice, awaiting a cataclysmic end."

Source: www.explorebigsky.org by Michael J. Ober



Wilnston Bros. Material yard 1908 ,small fire; sources: spokane historical society

Taft Cemetery and the "Big Burn" of 20/21 Aug 1910

Because of the devastating fire, known as the "Big Burn," that swept through Idaho and Montana, destroying 3 million acres, not only was Taft destroyed, but the "boot hill" cemetery was as well. Recently the cemetery site has been found thanks to a 77 year old miner's keen memory as well as technological advances. Studies will be ongoing to determine who is buried there including "Swedes, Italians, Chinese, Australians, boys seeking their fortunes, gamblers, farmers, prostitutes, disappointed miners from the Alaskan gold rush, wastrels, college men, uneducated laborers, the last of the Old West gunmen, Minnesota lumberjacks and French-Canadian woodsmen."

The original search for the cemetery was off track by 400-500 yards according to C. A. "Butch" Jacobson, the retired miner and president of the Capt. John Mullan Museum. "As a teenager in the 1950s, Mr. Jacobson had learned the location of the cemetery when he and his father had stopped at the Taft Hotel and Saloon after a successful elk hunt. The saloon manager had pointed out the location of the graveyard on a nearby hillside, Mr. Jacobson said." Confirmation was quickly found when high-tech metal detectors located belt buckles, buttons, nails and bullets under the forest floor. Burials are reported to include a "Montenegrin — known by his fellow countrymen in Taft as 'The King' — who was fatally shot in 1907 by an irate railroad foreman. The foreman himself was buried there after he was murdered in revenge."

"Carole Johnson, now a Forest Service supervisor whose ranger district encompasses the site of the rediscovered cemetery, tim train she was riding as a child with her mother was stopped by a snow slide in Taft in 1908 or 1909. She remembered seeing 'arms and legs of corpses sticking out of snowbanks' piled high outside a saloon. 'She told us they were killed in a bar fight or whatever, and because of the deep snow in Taft, they were just pitched out the door into the snow drifts to be buried in the spring,' Ms. Johnson said. 'Now we know where they buried them.'"

"In just one night, August 20, 1910, Taft fell to the flames. It was an easy target, its wooden structures mowed down by a relentless firestorm funneled through the narrow canyon. In places, even the steel rails of the Milwaukee Line bent and curled. Forest rangers tried to organize workers into a firefighting force but the citizens chose instead to break open barrels of whiskey and consume as much as they could while the flames approached. Just in time, a rescue train arrived from Missoula and residents tumbled into boxcars as the locomotive retreated through smoke and fire back down the valley. By morning Taft was no more."

Sourcse: NY Times Sun 15 Dec 2109 p 19 by Bill Morlin, www.explorebigsky.com

Mendon Historical Society

The Mendon Historical Society has many treasures that are sure to delight Taft family members and are well displayed in their new home. We have taken the liberty of borrowing three photos from their website to encourage you to visit your ancestors' hometown.

Left: Lowell's Dairy memorabilia

See Berneta DeVries, TFA member p 2

Above: First sewing machine (Wheeler and Wilson model 1850-1864), used in Mendon, owned by Mrs. Helen Taft (Mrs Austin A.), another TFA Member.

In Memoriam

Gayle Ellen (Gilleo) Gallant

Lisa (Gallant) O'Brien sent notice that her mother had passed away. We sene our sincere condolences to Lisa and her family.

Gayle Ellen (Gilleo) Gallant was born 15 Jul 1947 in Ticonderoga, NY, daughter of Millard Niles and Ellen Louise (Hier) Gilleo, and died 27 Jun 2019 in Crown Point, NY. She was buried in the Ironville Cemetery, Essex, NY. She will be deeply missed by her husband of 44 years Michael James Gallant, son Douglas Gallant (Teresa), daughter Lisa O'Brien (Timothy), grandson Benjamin Gallant, Aunt Joan Hier, and nephews and cousins.

Gayle Ellen Gilleo was the daughter of Millard Niles Gilleo (Millard Niles Gilleo, Niles Henry Gilleo, Clayton James Gilleo and Ida May Moore, Henry W. Moore, John Moore and Luthera (Timothy, Josiah, Timothy, Jacob, Israel, Robert, Robert) Taft.

Gayle was a member of several lineage societies including the General Society of Mayflower Descendants, the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR) and the United States Daughters of 1812. Gayle also loved gardening, wintering in Florida, and was dedicated to preserving the 1843 2nd Congregational Church which is currently part of the Penfield Museum in Crown Point, NY. She had a personal connection to the church because her ancestor Timothy Taft helped build it and she lovingly referred to it as "her church".

Source: www.wilcoxandreganfuneralhome.com. echovita

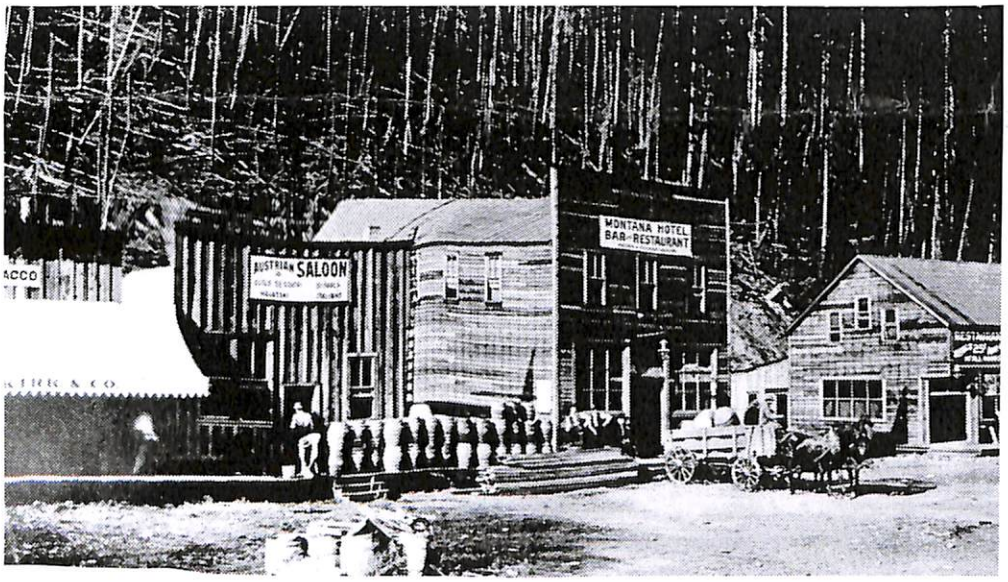
The Taft Tunnel (St. Paul Pass) and the Route of the Hiawatha Rail Trail

The Taft, or St. Paul Pass, Tunnel is located in western Montana along the border with Idaho. Its East Portal is located at 4,150' above sea level and heads southwest into Idaho, and is reached by Interstate 90, exit 5 "Taft." The area hosts a maintenance yard for the Montana Department of Transportation, access to the *Route of the Hiawatha* rail trail, and access to St. Regis (Sohon) / Mullan Pass vía Randolph Creek Road, which heads north and west from I-90.

The tunnel itself was drilled from both the eastern and western ends, meeting in 1909, with the separate bores only slightly off. Workers earned from $1.80 to $3.50 a day and even included 1,000 immigrants from Montenegro known for their rock mining skills.

The Hiawatha Trail is a 15 mile long route and part of the hiking and mountain bike trail system that runs between MT and ID. The trail opened in June 2001 and is considered one of the finest and most popular public biking trails in the country. Along the route are many interpretive signs explaining the incredible natural terrain as well as railroad history. Most people begin the trail at the East Portal entrance to this tunnel and enjoy a leisurely adventure through seven tunnels and over seven trestles. Having a slight downhill slope (since it is an abandoned railroad bed), nearly 60,000 people yearly enjoy the trail, marveling at the forested mountainous scenery that few could access otherwise. The trail is open late May through mid September. Shuttle service is available for both bikers and their bikes to get them back to the beginning.

Sources: enwikipedia, Hiawatha Rail Trail



Remember Taft, MT

You begin your bike ride at the East Portal entrance to the Tunnel, which is located just out of the frame in the far right on the photo on the first page.

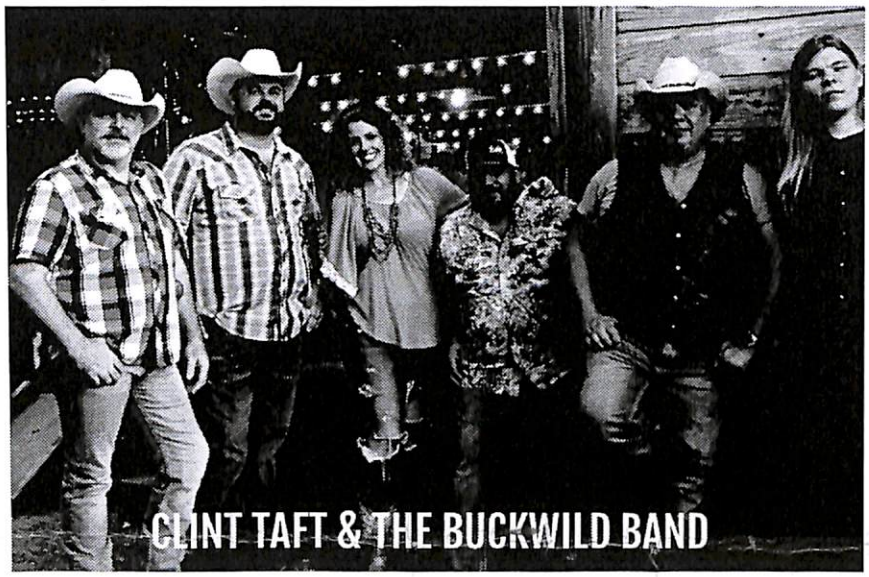
Photo Source: NY Times 15 Dec 2109 p 19

Please note:

The Taft Family Association and your editor's address is 95 Wyman Rd., Unit 1110, Keene, NH 03431 but sometimes the post office wants it to be Unit 1110, 95 Wyman Rd., Keene, NH 03431. I can't believe how many times the mail gremlins get confused and unhappy – no matter how correctly people are addressing the envelope.

Clint Taft and the Buckwild Band

Clint Taft's band is based in San Antonio, TX and is well-known for classic and Texas country, rock and other music of a similar nature. They travel extensively and front various bands. They won the Sequin Freedom Fiesta Battle of the Bands and were named the Best Band in Guadalupe County from 2015 through 2019 (to date). Interesting that the most well-known musical Tafts (at the moment) both harken to country western, trucking, rock and roll music (see Commander Cody in TTT 53 (2007) p 9).



So who is Clint Taft. Right now we can't say for certain, but one possibility (since he calls Sequin, TX home) is that he is Clint Patrick Taft the son of Debra Bee Batey and Patrick Arthur (Donald Lynn, Sereno Lynn, Edwin Bryant, James, Caleb, Caleb, Caleb, Daniel, Robert (Taft).

Sally Gagne sent her travel notes from a trip she took in 1982:

"In June 1982 I went through Uxbridge and Mendon, searching for any monument to the original Robert Taft, knowing from the *Taft Proceedings of 1874* that money for it had been collected. The State Tourist Office on Route 86 as one crosses the state line knew nothing about it. In Mendon, at first drive-around I also found nothing, but stopping at a roadside stand of the Taft Apple Orchard for help, I met Mildred Goss (Mrs. Mildred Goss, 18 Maple Street), officer in the Taft Family organization. I hadn't known such an organization existed! She cordially invited me to her kitchen, and gave me the papers incorporated here. She also gave me directions to the Taft Memorial, which was erected only in 1955. (It was finally put up because in the 1950s the state had directed that the funds collected in the 1870s be used or be absorbed by the state.)

"From either Mendon or neighboring Uxbridge (my notes are unclear), the Memorial is the next right after Taft's Drive or Taft's Road. It is on the left a half mile or so down, opposite a small gas station. The pond is not visible from the road, but can be seen by taking a short walk behind the gas station. No trace of the original homestead exists, and one can only estimate where it was, somewhere in the field behind the stone with the plaque. Mildred's husband was instrumental in buying back a small parcel of land adjoining the road from the family who presently owns the field. The small lot is surrounded by a stone wall.

"Mildred said the town has a Taft Library, directed by Dick Messinger, who is avid in his historical interest in the Taft family. In 1994 Dick moved to Cape Cod, but he is staying on as part-time editor of the Newsletter."

How well TFA members remember Millie Goss and Dick Messinger and how instrumental they were in helping the Taft Family Association thrive.
The Taft Memorial Stone is seen to the right and is the one we are discussing with local officials to see how the memorial and the land it is on can be maintained in the future.

Taft Family Association Officers

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Website Editor: David W. Taft, Alpharetta, GA http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~taft/
Executive Committee: Charles F. Davis Jr., Sally Gagne

Please do not send any dues at this time, thank you.